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Writing Sample

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Excerpt from Strand of a Thousand Pearls.

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Strand of a Thousand Pearls

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Chapter One

Matti Azizyan's Birthday, Five-thirty in the Morning

At last, the luminous match was struck and the day was lit. But Matti had awakened earlier before her father rose from his dreamless bed and went, sorrowful, to the sea; before her sister Sofia s blue baby awoke and shook the house with his cough; before her sister Lizzie returned from night-shift at the hospital, her high heels clacking on the living-room floor, revealing under her white nurse s smock a shimmering low-necked dress and colorless bruises.

Matti woke up knowing she'd had a bad dream, but could not remember what it was. Solly Azizyan, short, barefoot, got off the iron bed with the springs that moaned like a weary lover, remembered that his mother was dead, and walked very quietly down the corridor with the Indian gods. Without the creaking of her parents bed-springs Matti would not have known that her father s small shadow was moving across the statues stone faces. Every morning at daybreak, as he passed from the iron bed to the bathroom, her father was able to move his body without churning the air with his limbs, without stirring the dust that had settled on the statues, or swirling the warm breath rising from his wife s and children s lungs. He passed among the particles of light that filtered in from the living-room, his footsteps almost ethereally delicate, and only the burbling of water in the basin indicated that he had completed his route and would shortly be going down to the sea.

Matti held her breath and her thoughts when her father s shadow stopped abruptly and a circle of light fell on his face as he stood in the doorway of the children s room. A smile flickered on his scorched fisherman s face, sprinkled with beads of water he didn t care to press into a towel.

Matti s eyelids slammed shut and she pretended to be asleep, but she d seen how much her father had aged in the six months she d been away at boarding-school. She noticed his new teeth that replaced the bad old ones, the white stubble sprouting amid the furrows of his face, and that the coppery glint of his hair was fading to a dull grey. Her eyeballs darted under the lids and her lashes quivered, but she did not stir.

She let her father caress her face and hair with the forlorn gaze of parents who are unable to save their children, and waited for him to walk away.

But he didn t want to move. Her father was full of longings, and not only for her. He missed his mother, Grandma Touran, who had died before Matti was sent to boarding-school. He missed his wife, Iran, who had withdrawn from him into psalms and memorial candles. He missed his son Maurice, who was sleeping, shut away and ill-humoured, in the adjoining room. And he missed Matti s older sisters, Sofia, Marcelle and Lizzie, who had been cuddly, laughing girls and were now embittered, disappointed women. He missed the children he used to have years ago, when he was still able to comfort them with boiled milk that he poured from cup to cup till it cooled, and sweetened with lots of honey.

Breathing lightly and furtively, Matti smelled the odour of salt on his clothes and kelp on his skin, and was almost tempted to open her eyes, jump up and sit on the edge of the bed calling out, Come, Daddy, come to me, I m awake now! But she stopped herself. The previous evening, when she d come home from boarding-school in honour of her birthday, her father had still been at sea, and she d fallen asleep before he returned. She knew that this evening, when her birthday was over and she d gone back to school, he would still be selling his catch at the stall in the wholesale market in Netanya. Solly was torn between his various longings and was about to wake her, and Matti sensed the approach of his smile through her closed eyelids, when Sofia s baby began to cough.

Solly turned around quickly. His sharp movement struck Matti's face.

As Matti peered through her lashes, her father, drawn by anguish to the suffering infant, withdrew his gaze and showed her his square bald patch and went to the living-room.

Solly stood clutching his coffee cup with both hands, but he did not drink. The dark liquid was bitter; the sugar bowl had been empty for a week and nobody had bothered to refill it. Solly liked to sweeten his coffee with two and a half teaspoons of sugar and dunk a biscuit in it,but the oven, like his wife s body, had gone cold. Iran s unhappiness had embittered her pastries and she d stopped baking them. The colibri birds had also stopped hovering outside their bedroom window in the hope of sweet crumbs.

The more Iran withdrew from him, wrapped herself in her sorrow and clung to the tombs of holy men, the more Solly missed his mother. He mourned her quietly, to avoid burdening the others. So secretly did he long for her that it troubled his conscience. He knew, too, that in the world of the dead his mother was awake, smoking, listening for the echo of his longings, the way she used to wait for him when he came home late. His wife was making him jealous. Seeing her muddled with despair, appropriated by rabbinical mountebanks who stole her away from him and bent her to their fancy, he tried with desperate courtship to remind her of his love. But her apple-round shoulders jerked in alarm when he touched her, and her beautiful eyes became agitated, as if she did not recognise in the balding old man with the porcelain teeth the lover who d planted five children and all that beauty in her womb.

"It's getting longer every day," he muttered. "Every day your mother's getting more crazy."

Solly knew that the sea was swelling and waiting for him, but his wife was dawdling over her prayers in the synagogue, and he decided to wait for her. He sighed and absent-mindedly kissed the lip of the coffee cup, tried to console himself with a sip and was shocked by the bitterness.

When Iran Azizyan finally shuffled her wooden mules home from the synagogue, Lizzie was still in her disgraceful dress and Maurice had not yet woken up. She advanced like a beetle under the woollen shawl and lavender-scented kerchief that she had adopted together with the other old-age mannerisms, her mind cracking with superstitions.

Her lips were still mumbling the dawn prayer she d heard at the synagogue, but her private pleas to God were already trickling in the crannies of her mind. With every prayer and hymn she thought about her son Maurice, her big daughters, Sofia Kadosh, Marcelle Hajjabi and Lizzie Moussafi, about her little daughter Matti and her sick grandson. It was only on their behalf that she spoke to God, and the prayers ravaged her soul upright vertical prayers, circular and convoluted prayers, winding and singular prayers, recited according to tradition and stammered from the heart, morning, noon and night and in her dreams. Iran Azizyan exhausted herself hollow with prayers. Her soul was running down, like the six candles she lit every Monday and Thursday morning, the days when the Torah scroll is taken out of its ark. Her heart dripped and congealed, and the next day, with a layer of crusted wax underneath, it relit itself and wept.

By now the wise women were mocking Iran s despair.

I ll make you some tea, missis. You just drink, calm down, then go home, was how the coffee-grounds reader dealt with her.

The truth, honey? the zodiac-reading woman cackled. Astrology is rubbish don t you know, just make-believe.

You here again? grumbled the reader of cards. Come to shame me in front of all my customers?

They didn t even charge her any more, because in spite of all the good advice they d given her with the usual rituals, none of her, loved ones were relieved of their miseries. They regarded her as a nuisance and their greed changed to pity and their pity to cold-shouldered disdain. Whenever they saw her shuffling towards their houses, her arms dangling helplessly, they barred their doors, turned off the lights and ignored her urgent knocking. But Iran kept coming back. Terror-stricken, she carried her multiplying troubles out of her house, took one bus after another, and grovelled tearfully before their ample, haughty bosoms. She sought a bride for Maurice in a pack of cards, looked in coffee-grounds for a miracle for Sofia who had lost her strength to live, searched in weird rituals for a solution for Marcelle, whose love had died and no one would want her now, a healing for Lizzie who wandered by night like a hungry whore and whose husband beat her senseless, a genuine rabbinical blessing for the sick baby, and a crack in the Wailing Wall in which to post a letter to God pleading for help for little Matti s confused mind.

More than once she fell victim to crude impostures. She was sent to collect the tears of she-donkeys in a glass vial. She was made to yell mysterious Arab imprecations in all the rooms of the house in order to drive out the demons who had established a kingdom there. But the troubles in her children s lives did not retreat before her yells, irrespective of whether she shouted in Isfahani Persian, in Bengali or broken Hebrew. For every she-ass tear she collected Iran shed ten of her own. Her house began to stink of disappointment, neglect and the little bagged amulets whose dubious contents soon rotted. Only the praise of love came into her house; love itself had long ago departed from it.

It was twenty-seven years since Iran and Solly had launched their bedroom and the colibri birds gathered in front of their window. But since her children had grown up the house attracted only rumours and guesses about love. Lovers and bridegrooms came, even a grandson was born, but these were merely tail-ends, hints and echoes. Love s footsteps could be heard climbing the stairs, coming right up, but it never knocked on the front door.

That was why Iran undertook to abstain from all pleasures. She no longer sipped her tea with a sugar-cube held between her lips, letting it dissolve slowly down her gullet. She took vow after vow, but no one was greatly impressed by her self-mortification and her wagers against fate. Fate itself ignored the small woman whose tea was bitter, who sprinkled salt on peaches and black pepper on pears, who swore that she would never again taste anything sweet until her children knew peace once more.

Iran approached the house. The guava tree spread its shadow over her and threw thin bands of light across her face. She tilted her head back to look at the third floor and the sweet whiff of neglected guavas blew into her nose. The sky was cloudy, but her eyes were clear. She remembered her youngest daughter Matti, whose eleventh birthday it was today, and who was sleeping in her own bed after so many nights in the boarding-school for crazy children.

Sixty steps separated the Azizyan home from the street. As she climbed up, step after step, Iran had one thought in mind, the kind of thought that fills the whole body, not just the head, a simple thought that flashes all at once, but any attempt to describe it becomes convoluted and tiresome.

Her body recalled the simple contact that had once existed between her and her children, the ease with which she used to touch their skin when they were smooth and rosy, the freedom with which she kissed and pressed them against her stomach. Iran s longings rushed backwards, reversing the direction of time, which had complicated and ruined everything. She longed for the time when there was no need to justify caresses, when the self-explained embraces did not produce anguish, when the countless, endless, insatiable kisses were still only kisses. She missed the mighty force of her motherhood, which could heal any insult, remove all misery, resolve all pain. She missed her children s childhood, the body that she and they formed together, one big warm flesh. She thought about the honesty that families lose as they mature, and the gaps which appear when the individualities take shape. She recalled the tickling on Saturday mornings in the iron bed which was filled with children and laughter. Thinking of their separation, she entered her home.

> There! You see! Maurice shrieked at the sight of his mother s wet, tearful face. She starts crying in the morning and doesn t stop till she goes to sleep at night, crying and crying all day just because of you!
>
> He didn't know that by then Iran wept only for herself.

It was six-thirty on that Monday morning, Matti s birthday and the anniversary of her twin brother s death, but for a moment the Azizyan house became once again a diamond-cutting workshop, as it had been many years before, when Iran and Solly paid 5,754 pearls for it. The tears in Iran s eyes turned into faceted clear gems that diffracted the light into myriad colours. Through her diamond tears she could see Lizzie standing in debauched apathy in the middle of

the room, shielding her breasts from Maurice, who was yelling, cursing and raising his hand to beat her. She saw Marcelle abjectly pleading with him to calm down, and Sofia begging him to take pity on her sick baby and stop. And she saw her husband lonely without her, weary and helpless.

God! Oh God! she wailed in her Persian accent. What did I do to deserve this punishment? Look at them, God, look at my children. A woman of forty-four who looked sixty she lifted her hands to the ceiling to tug at God s mantle, and wept loudly like a five year old child.

Matti got up slowly. So slowly that when she stood up she glanced back at the empty bed behind her, to make sure she had gathered up all of her body. She couldn t tell if she was shivering from cold or terror Very quietly she came out of the children s room, all of eleven years old this morning, slipped past the Indian gods which were exuding dust in the corridor, and crept, limb by limb, into the kitchen. Iran s candlesticks were weeping wax tears on the worktop. Beside them the proud flame of the memorial candle for Grandma Touran burned steadily, while the memorial candle for Matti s dead twin fluttered, shaken by the yelling in the living-room. Approaching the door, she smelled the sweet musty odour of the guavas. She saw her mother s anguish cleaving the ceiling in two and the glass drops of the chandelier vibrating, but she scarcely heard the yells, the crying and the blows.

Hold your breath, Moni, she whispered to her dead twin, who was crouching behind her. When you hold your breath your ears also close. Shhh. . . come!

Matti went out through the front door. Her body tensed. Quietly, unobserved, she pressed against the neighbours door and thought about knocking. In her mind she knocked. Softly. Not a sound came in response. She stroked the door handle. It moved by itself and the door opened. Matti put her head into the silent, empty flat. In it lived two people, a husband and wife without children, who took care of each other as if he was her son and she his daughter. Their bedroom was in darkness, and two glowing strips of an electric radiator heated the unmoving air. Matti wriggled in between the bodies of the woman and the man, who were lying closely and barrenly together. Between them she felt small, even smaller than herself.

They awoke together. Little Maui, they whispered softly in one voice. You re back, our little Matti?